

Phoenix director says, Alcoholism takes life and profits

BY SUSAN ROSIEK

Business and industry lose some \$29 billion a year because of alcoholism, according to Frank MacDonell, director of Phoenix Alcoholism Therapy Services, Inc.

Those losses are a combination of high absenteeism among workers, pay-outs in benefits and production losses resulting from poor workmanship.

"The number of alcoholics is simply astonishing. We have a massive alcohol problem in this country," MacDonell, who heads the treatment program at Garden City Hospital, told some 25 members of the Garden City Chamber of Commerce last week.

"To give you an example of how serious the problem is, a plant in our vicinity had to hire 50,000 persons to fill 3,000 jobs because of alcoholism," said MacDonell.

"This county produces and consumes two-thirds of the world's alcohol and it imports the other 25 percent remainder. According to coroners I've talked to, 80 percent of all violent deaths involve alcohol. According to law enforcement officials, 50 percent of all traffic accidents involve alcohol," said MacDonell.

MACDONELL ADDED that if the staggering number of alcoholics in this country doesn't shake people up "the number of dollars lost because of alcoholism is unbelievable."

"About 28 percent of all acute care hospital admissions are for alcoholism — no matter what the diagnosis. That's about \$190-\$250 per bed per day. And, most of those people aren't treated for their core problem — alcoholism. Doctors are often reluctant to talk about a person's personal habits," said MacDonell.

MacDonell said that besides acute care, excessive drinkers frequently use one of the most expensive forms of medical care — the emergency room. One worker at an area auto plant used more than \$50,000 in health care benefits in one year because of alcoholism, said MacDonell.

"That included emergency care — mainly because he abused his child and

psychiatric help for his wife. The worker was admitted about seven times. One hospital admission often costs \$5,000," he said.

MacDonell started the first general hospital treatment program in 1970 for alcoholics in Wayne County at Ann Arbor Hospital. It was the only general treatment program that would admit a person with alcoholism as the primary diagnosis. MacDonell noted that as a result of the program "hundreds of female alcoholics were uncovered and treated."

"MORE THAN 35 percent of my patients then were females," noted MacDonell.

MacDonell said the object of the Phoenix program is to present a patient with objective data — physical evidence that starts out to disprove they drink too much.

"If a person can see that their alcoholism is a disease state, then it becomes easier for them to accept. We begin by trying to prove they are not alcoholics."

"We do it by using physical evidence. It seems to give people some dignity in making their own diagnosis. For women especially, this is tremendously important. There is a moral stigma attached to being an alcoholic and for women that stigma is even greater," MacDonell said.

MacDonell estimated that some 1,200-1,000 acutely ill alcoholics pass through the Garden City facility each year.

Among those persons currently in treatment for alcoholism, 10 percent will be dead within 12 months and the average age at death will be 43, according to statistics outlined by MacDonell and confirmed by the National Council on Alcoholism.

MacDonell began his career in alcoholism counseling at the Sacred Heart Center program in Detroit in 1967. From there he was recruited by the District of Columbia Public Health Department.

He also worked on a program in Oklahoma City and has attended psychopharmacology courses at Harvard and studied at Rutgers, the University of



FRANK MACDONELL

Texas at Austin and the National Institute of Mental Health.

BESIDES COORDINATING the Phoenix programs in this area, MacDonell is a consultant for the UAW-Chrysler Corp. CURB Program (Chrysler and UAW Rehabilitation Program). MacDonell also is a member of the Association of Labor Management Administrators and Consultants on Alcoholism, a non-profit group of management and labor specialists aimed at developing ways of treating alcoholism.

MacDonell told his chamber audience that treatment for alcoholism is expensive. However, he said that

through a unified approach, some 70 percent of those who enter treatment can be rehabilitated.

"It's expensive because it's new. By making allies of people besides physicians we can reduce the costs. At one time physicians were reluctant to admit people to the hospital because of alcoholism."

"Today, I believe the pendulum has swung too far the other way. Too many people are admitted to acute care facilities. I believe more people could be treated on an out-patient basis, thereby reducing the cost," explained MacDonell.

"We need to develop a comprehensive system of care. We don't need the piecemeal bandage approach. We need the community to become aware that everyone comes in contact with alcoholics — clergymen, police officers and employers. They must be aware of the programs and facilities that can help these people."

"MAJOR INDUSTRIES have found that the unified approach saves money and lives," added MacDonell.

After years of working with alcoholics and studying the problem, MacDonell knows it will never be erased. What he would like to see is for people to develop a "healthy attitude toward alcohol — it's use, non-use and abuse."

"We have a tremendous amount of pressure on us to drink. We are bombarded daily with the message," he said.

MacDonell believes this country could substantially reduce its alcohol problem if, like many European countries, "it treated alcohol like food."

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